

Sage-grouse season closures reflect FWP's concern about number declines

On page 29 of this issue, *Outdoor Life* editor and Glasgow-area resident Andrew McKean laments the closure of sage-grouse hunting over much of the species' range in Montana. And rightly so. The loss of any hunting opportunity is a serious matter. But of even greater consequence would be for these grand birds of the sagebrush-steppe to be listed as federally threatened or endangered by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS), an outcome that's very possible.

In July the Montana Fish and Wildlife Commission voted to close the sage-grouse season in southeastern and south-central Montana and northern Montana north of U.S. Highway 2, and shorten the season from 60 to 30 days elsewhere. The measure comes at a time when sage-grouse in large parts of the state are rapidly declining. Since 2008, numbers have dropped statewide from roughly 34 males per breeding lek to about 13 males per lek this year.

Declines over the past several decades have been even worse in the other ten western states where the bird lives. The USFWS is

Though the USFWS has said that hunting is not a major threat to the birds' populations, it is important for us to show that Montana takes recent declines here seriously. Sage-grouse numbers in some areas have steadily dropped over the past six years due to weather, sagebrush prairie eradication, and possibly disease. We don't think it's right to continue hunting birds in these areas at this time.

Still, as hunters know and scientific studies have verified, the big issue is habitat, not hunting. The main reason for long-term sage-grouse reductions in Montana is habitat loss—mainly from burning sagebrush to create more cattle pasture and tilling it to plant crops. Over the past several months, a governor-appointed citizen's work group has developed a plan to prevent the sage-grouse from being listed, primarily through sagebrush-steppe conservation. Among the group's main recommendations:

- ▶ Focus on conserving core habitat and connectivity areas
- ▶ Respect all valid, existing land uses and rights in these areas
- ▶ Require any new developments or land use requiring a permit—

such as oil and gas drilling on state lands—to show that it will not harm sage-grouse populations.

Governor Steve Bullock is considering these and other recommendations, and will issue his executive order on sage-grouse conservation this fall.

Also at work is the federal Sage-Grouse Initiative, run by the Natural Resources Conservation Service, created in 2010 to conserve and restore remaining sagebrush grasslands. So far the program has spent \$150 million across the West. Partners, including such disparate groups as the National Audubon Society and the National Cattlemen's Beef Association, have contributed another \$75 million total.

In addition, over the past several years FWP has purchased 30-year conservation leases on 200,000 acres of

sage-grouse habitat from willing landowners.

We believe that these and other conservation efforts by agencies, livestock operators, and private groups, along with the directives from Governor Bullock's executive order, will ensure sage-grouse survival long into Montana's future. But at this point it's up to USFWS leaders, who are scheduled to make a decision some time in 2015. If they don't agree and decide to list the bird after all, we may look back at this year's partial season closures and consider them part of the good ol' days of sage-grouse hunting in Montana.

—M. Jeff Hagener, *Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks Director*



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looking at all the states as a whole. Thanks to abundant habitat, in many cases kept healthy by well-managed cattle grazing, Montana has the second-highest number of sage-grouse in the West (only Wyoming has more). But if the sage-grouse is listed, it will be listed in all states, not just those where the bird has grown most scarce.

The listing of sage-grouse would be hugely unpopular in Montana. Under provisions of the Endangered Species Act, the USFWS would have to severely restrict grazing and energy development on BLM and other federal lands. Sagebrush alterations on private property would be punishable by steep fines and even jail time. And we would lose our management authority, including the ability to allow any hunting.